

Chinese Evacuation Operations Part 1: A New Consideration for the Pacific

Peter Connolly

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The increasing number of Chinese citizens living, working and travelling abroad as part of China's rise has created an obligation for the People's Republic of China to protect them. This is particularly the case in the South Pacific, where anti-Chinese riots in 2006 and 2009 led to some of the earliest examples of 'overseas citizen protection'.

The Chinese leadership had previously assumed that, in most cases, other powers would evacuate Chinese citizens along with their own from situations of unrest abroad, but this has changed in the last decade, leading to new policies and capabilities that have in turn generated new expectations among the Chinese population. This phenomenon can be explained as the response of a rising power needing to protect its people and interests overseas as its influence expands. It could also be seen as a justification for the projection of power to underwrite China's growing stake in world affairs. Part 1 of this series examines this trend, while Part 2 investigates a recent and highly nationalistic genre of Chinese movies used by the former to explain the latter in a clear move to establish such operations by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as 'the new normal' for both domestic and international audiences.

Policy and precedent

China's 1982 constitution expresses the state's intention to protect its people and interests abroad, but it didn't have the capacity to enforce its policy of overseas citizen protection (海外公民保护) until this century. The stimulus for change arrived in 2004 when 14 Chinese workers were killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The domestic uproar caused the Chinese Communist Party (the Party) to acknowledge that large numbers of Chinese were living in high-risk environments overseas (Zerba 2014:1093–1112).

A 2014 study revealed China had started to conduct small-scale evacuations using non-military means to extract citizens in times of crisis or disaster from the Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga and Lebanon in 2006; Chad

and Thailand in 2008; and Haiti and Kyrgyzstan in 2010 (Duchâtel et al. 2014:46, 47). Previously, the only evacuations of note had been from Indonesia in the mid-1960s and Kuwait in 1990. The largest Chinese evacuations to date occurred in 2011 during the Arab Spring uprisings, when China retrieved 1800 citizens from Egypt, 2000 from Syria and 35,860 from Libya, along with 9000 from Japan after the Tohoku earthquake. A reported 48,000 Chinese evacuated in 2011 was more than five times the total number evacuated between 1980 and 2010 (ibid.:48).

The evacuation from Libya was the first to significantly involve the PLA, largely in a coordination role, with limited assistance from the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and the PLA Navy (PLAN). This operation saw 35,860 overseas Chinese evacuated over 12 days using 74 civilian aircraft, 14 ships and approximately 100 buses (Zerba 2014:1101). This gave the Chinese military a reason to purchase more amphibious and airlift capability for contingencies where civilian charter would not be possible, such as in landlocked countries or higher threat environments (ibid.:1107).

The evacuation from Yemen in 2015, carried out exclusively by the military, was the first time the Chinese navy had also [evacuated citizens of other countries](#). Between 30 March and 2 April 2015, the naval command diverted a Chinese flotilla of three PLAN vessels from a counter-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden to the Port of Aden. They evacuated 629 Chinese nationals and 279 foreign citizens from 15 other nations to Djibouti (Danlu 4/4/2015; Gang 23/4/2015; Liping 8/3/2018). Chinese observers viewed the operation as a successful demonstration of the navy's new rapid-reaction capabilities, developed through missions in the Gulf of Aden and off the Somali coast (Gang 23/4/2015).

Capability and expectation

As China's state and non-state overseas interests have grown so has the military's ability to protect them, satisfying the

expectations of an expanding, social media-savvy middle class. The geostrategic requirements of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative are reflected in [China's Military Strategy 2015](#), which required the PLA to develop a force structure able to 'protect the security of strategic SLOC and overseas interests'. Accordingly, the Central Military Commission decided last year to expand the PLA Marine Corps from 20,000 to 100,000, with many stationed overseas. A significant portion of these marines will be based at China's first declared overseas military bases — in the port of [Obock in Djibouti](#) with more likely to be based at Gwadar in Pakistan. These marines will protect Chinese oil imports from the Middle East at strategic nodes along the 'Belt and Road'.

The Marine Corps and bases are part of China's strategy of 'far seas protection' (远海护卫) which requires the navy to safeguard overseas interests, including resources, strategic sea lanes, overseas citizens, investments, and commercial entities (China's Military Strategy 2015). It has led to the development of a blue water navy capable of operating globally with aircraft carrier and amphibious capabilities (Chan 13/3/2017).

Accidental friction

As the PLA's capability to project force and protect Chinese citizens overseas continues to grow, so does the Party's readiness to use the policy of overseas citizen protection and the Chinese people's expectation that they will do so. As China's global interests, diaspora and footprint continue to expand, this may result in unexpected frictions when overseas citizen protection is applied to situations outside China's traditional core interests.

An example of this would be a recurrence of the anti-Chinese riots experienced in Tonga and Solomon Islands in 2006 and PNG in 2009. Significant numbers of Chinese citizens are often at risk in Melanesia, where traditional partners (such as Australia, New Zealand or the United States) expect to provide the forces for evacuation and, if necessary, stabilisation support. Without adequate preparation, clear communication and shared understanding, an evacuation operation by the PLA in the South Pacific could contribute to, or generate, unintended consequences, including questions of sovereignty, citizenship and jurisdiction. Such an eventuality has the potential to generate what has been described elsewhere as 'accidental friction' (Connolly 2015, 2016 and 5/6/2017).

Forthcoming

Part 2 of this series explores recent trends in Chinese movies used to generate patriotic pride in domestic audiences, while also attempting to normalise the perception of Chinese power projection within the international community.

Author notes

Peter Connolly, Director of the Australian Army Research Centre and previously Director International Engagement for the Australian Army, is researching his PhD at ANU.

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